

The University of Chicago

THE SOCIAL GOSPEL AND THE  
IDEA OF PROGRESS

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED  
TO THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

1937  

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By  
A. KATHRYN ROGERS

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## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY

The social gospel in America is a phase of modernist theology in which a considered attempt is made to apply the teachings of Jesus to the problems of an industrial society. Its appearance cannot be understood without an appreciation of the social conditions at the turn of the century which aroused the conscience of ethically sensitive men and women to the need for social reform. Nor can its theoretical formulation be understood apart from the contributions of the social sciences to modern thought. For to them is due the articulation, and, to a certain extent, the creation of our modern social consciousness with its dual emphasis on the social determination of the individual and on the possibility of social control. Further, with them originated that interest in the social nature and function of religion which is of particular importance to the social gospel theologian.

It is not within our province, however, to attempt a detailed study of the history of the social gospel in its genetic development, fascinating and important as that story is. Our concern is rather with an analysis and evaluation of the theory of the social gospel as it developed under the stimulus of the social sciences. In particular, our interest lies in the way in which the social gospel theologians related the Christian world view, namely, the concept of the Kingdom of God, to the interpretation of history and society popular at the time, namely, the theory of progress. For without knowledge of its roots it is impossible to understand and evaluate the resulting social ethic.

As in the case of all modernist theology, the crucial point of estimate of the social gospel lies in the way in which the "permanent and central values of inherited orthodoxy" are related to new problems and ideas. Accordingly, we have studied the social gospel literature, in particular the work of Washington Gladden, Walter Rauschenbusch, Shailer Mathews, and Harry F. Ward, the most important representatives of this type of theology in America in the first two decades of the present century, with the



following questions in mind: Do the authors make use of an idea of progress? If so, what form does the doctrine of progress take? Secondly, how is the idea of progress related to traditional Christian theology? What rôle does it play in the modernizing of Christian tradition? Finally, how is the resulting combination to be evaluated? These are the questions at issue.

Evidence is not lacking that all four of the individuals mentioned hold to a concept of progress as an integral part of their thought. Progress is conceived as movement in the direction of a world wide democracy in all areas of life,--political, social, economic. The following quotation is a typical expression of this faith:

It is increasingly apparent that the new order both in plan and in experiment is forming around certain definite principles. Men everywhere are seeking for a larger measure of equality and for the realization of fraternity in universal service to each other. There are more and more determined to make the social machinery an efficient means to the highest ends of human living. It is becoming manifest that the development of personality is to supersede the acquisition of goods as the goal of social activity and that the fullest development of personality is to be found in the effort to realize the solidarity of the human family.

These developments of the present hour make it still clearer that the principles around which the new order is forming did not drop suddenly out of the sky, were not merely conceived in the imaginations of great men, but have their roots in social necessity. They are the historical unfolding of the spiritual possibilities of the human race out of the environment in which mankind has successively found itself and which it has progressively conquered. Their development and enlargement indicate very clearly that there is in all history a stream of progress. It by no means always flows straight forward; sometimes it eddies and its main currents turn upon themselves, the whole stream bends and flows backward for a space, but in the long run there is progress.<sup>1</sup>

It is a faith based upon a social philosophy concerned with the establishment of three major presuppositions: (1) Human history, biological and social, is the record of the emergence and growth of spiritual values; (2) The achievement of these values rests upon the organic character of biological and social life and is furthered by co-operation or mutual aid; (3) The whole process stems from the creative activity of the immanent God observable in nature and in man. Gladden, Mathews, and Ward each develop

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<sup>1</sup>Harry F. Ward, The New Social Order (New York: Macmillan, 1919), p. 356.

these themes in their own fashion and with characteristic emphases, while Rauschenbusch, working on the same assumptions, is less concerned to validate them than to show their compatibility with Christian doctrine.

Secondly, analysis shows that the relation of this doctrine of progress to the Christian world view and ethic has been carefully worked out by these writers. At the outset the influence of the doctrine of progress is evident in the insistence that the Christian doctrine of salvation must be extended to include the redemption of society. Salvation is a social matter involving not the rescue of the individual from the world but his rescue in the world, and therefore the rescue of the world itself. Salvation is thus equated with the achievement of the Kingdom of God on earth, and the latter is identified with the goal of progress, namely, democracy. Likewise the law of progress, i.e., co-operation, is specifically equated with the law of the Kingdom, i.e., love. Says Ward, "the simplest statement of this law of social progress is the principle of reciprocity which was taught in the Sermon on the Mount."<sup>1</sup> Conversely, Christ's teaching of love is valid because it is an expression of a fundamental law of social organization confirmed by scientific tests. Obstructions to progress are equally obstructions to the Kingdom and they must be removed no matter what the price. "The cross is not accidental but is a law of social progress."<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the Kingdom is to be attained in the course of evolutionary development, not by a catastrophic upheaval. It should be thought of as an historical achievement, not as a miraculous event. In other words, it is identical with the goal of progress in that it is the end toward which the stream of biological and social evolution is tending. To the extent that genuine progress has been attained the kingdom is already partially realized. It is "among us," a transforming energy, a historical force, finding expression in democratic institutions. As even greater gains are made in the Christianization of the social order its coming is hastened. Indeed, even now "the Kingdom of God is

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>2</sup>Walter Rauschenbusch, The Social Principles of Jesus (New York: Association Press, 1925), p. 193.



at hand."<sup>1</sup>

Finally it is interesting to note the way in which the immanent God of the philosophy of progress is related to the Christian concepts of God and of man. Jesus' teaching of the Fatherhood of God is interpreted as indicative of God's essential kinship with men, and thus of the immanence of God in human life. The God of Jesus is one with Creative Love working in the processes of history and suffering with men in their efforts to combat sin and imperfection. The theory of evolution simply amplifies the concept of God as Father. Thus the philosophical conception of the immanent God is personalized by its identification with the Christian belief in God as Father, and the Christian concept in turn is given an evolutionary slant by its reinterpretation in the light of contemporary philosophy. Further, if men are the sons of God, human personality should be revered because of its inherent worth. In this way the Christian concept of man reinforces the ideal of social solidarity and equality.

In evaluating this social philosophy so briefly outlined, we must first pay tribute to the achievements of these theologians. Notwithstanding a great tradition as to the concern of religion with the character of the common life, American Christianity of the latter half of the nineteenth century was in danger of becoming intellectually barren and socially futile. Its repudiation of scientific thought, especially with respect to the theory of evolution, and its failure to concern itself with the problems of an increasing industrial collectivism, were driving intellectuals, social radicals, and laboring groups alike from the church. The social gospel leaders attempted to adjust to the world view and social philosophy of these groups, and, thanks in part to their efforts, the church today is still a vital force in American public life. This is no mean accomplishment.

Secondly, the choice of the idea of progress as a mediating doctrine in this modernization of Christianity was a particularly happy one, for the doctrine of progress, in its widest sense, contained not merely a crystallization of current philosophical and scientific thought on the nature of history, but an

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<sup>1</sup>Shailer Mathews, The Social Gospel (Philadelphia, Boston, etc.: The Griffith and Rowland Press, 1910), p. 164. These words in capitals are the closing sentence of the book.



ethical deposit of the social idealism of three centuries. Thus it could serve at once as an approach to the modern world view and as a basis for a social ethic. The enlarged outlook on life to which Christianity fell heir in the doctrine of progress, and the conception of ethics as involving not merely regeneration of the individual but long time planning designed to destroy the social sources of evil were exceedingly valuable contributions. Furthermore, far from being incompatible with Christian thought, its basic assumptions of the worth of man and the value of life were in harmony with, if not derived from, the Christian tradition, thus making the combination an easy and natural one. Finally, since the average American at the turn of the century lived by his faith in progress, the social gospel leaders proved themselves master strategists in turning this source of emotional poise and moral enthusiasm to the uses of Christianity.

However, the question at issue is whether this type of religious philosophy is adequate for the direction and motivation of contemporary social idealism. In the first place, the methodology of these social gospel theologians is hard to defend, for their effort to reconcile Christian teaching with the doctrine of progress is an excellent illustration of the difficulties attendant on the method of modernism wherever applied. The standards which they adopted were derived not from revelation, nor from an autonomous ethic, nor from mystical experience, but from the study of history, i.e., from an interpretation of Jesus' way of life linked with a theory of the nature of history as involving progress toward a world wide community of love. But historical judgments are relative on the one hand to the viewpoint of the observer, and on the other to the context in which the event occurred. Thus the attempt to set up criteria for the evaluation and direction of the historical process by reference to some historical event is met not only with the problem of the objective validity of historical judgments, but with that of the relation of the past to the present, a matter of prime importance for a social gospel theology which attempts to relate past insights to present needs.

How can a historical event have significance for any period other than its own? How can standards of judgment relevant to a specific situation be of use in solving a problem raised by a new situation? Specifically, if the significance of Jesus'

life is to be estimated in terms of the function which he fulfilled for first century Palestine, what is the value of that life for twentieth century America? The modernist would say that his life has value for twentieth century America in so far as our experiences are analogous to those of the first century. Accordingly, he speaks of "abiding experiences," or of an "essential Christian continuum" to be discerned among the changing thought forms. His loyalty to Jesus is based on the assumption that "human nature and its needs remain substantially the same throughout the ages." But we are struck by the fact that the social gospel theologians, in their attempt to relate the teaching of Jesus to the problems of contemporary group life, far from dealing with an area of common experience, have to do with precisely the area of greatest difference between twentieth century America and first century Palestine. Thus the question of the relevance of these "abiding experiences" to the problem at issue cannot be avoided. Furthermore, if the self is in part a social product, then no area of life remains untouched by the social milieu, and all experiences suffer change with changing conditions. Thus it would seem highly problematical whether the social gospel theologian can gain help from the values relevant to the experience of a past age, when the problems for which he needs guidance arise out of quite different circumstances of life and condition even his inmost attitudes.

On the other hand, the attempt to find adequate bases for social idealism from some theory of the nature of the historical process as a whole, in this case the doctrine of progress, is not without its difficulties. Thanks to the unprecedented historical developments of the twentieth century arising from the increasing complexity of an industrial civilization, and to the changes in the method of writing history due to the work of modern scientific scholarship, not only is the idea of progress under fire, but there is no agreement on any substitute philosophy of history. The old interpretations seem invalidated by recent events and a new interpretation is slow to emerge. Contributory to this lag is the prevalent scepticism among historians as to the possibility of achieving a new synthesis, a scepticism based on the realization of the inescapable subjectivity of all historical productions, even the most "scientific," and an awareness of the apparent irreconcilability of the multitudinous factors operative in



human affairs. The social gospel leaders cannot relate their ethical demands to the controlling forces in history for there is no agreement as to what these forces may be,--or indeed as to whether there be any dominant and sustained influences at all. Thus the sense of stability gained from reliance on a definite interpretation of life is lost, and a realistic social ethic in line with, instead of variance from, the dominant factors in life awaits development.

Those anxious to preserve the values of the social gospel, therefore, must decide whether to abandon philosophy of history as a basis for their ethical idealism, or to set forth a new philosophy of history acceptable to modern thought. Basic to this enterprise is a thorough study of the doctrine of progress in the light of radically different notions of history which are bidding for recognition. Accordingly, we now turn to a systematic analysis of the issues involved in belief in progress.

The nature of one's approach to the problem of progress is determined by three factors: the criterion of judgment selected, the time span within which it is applied, and the area,--geographical, racial or cosmic,--which is analyzed. For instance, it makes a great deal of difference whether the question under discussion is of progress in technology in the last century in America, of progress in scientific knowledge during the recorded history of western civilization, of progress in the intellectual capacity of the genus man, since the time of homo sapiens, or of progress in an all-embracing perfection in the "whole creation" from the beginning of time. The focal point of most discussions of progress is western civilization and the time span that of recorded history. But in this context progress seems problematical whether the criterion selected be material, aesthetic, intellectual, moral, or religious. Accordingly, the attempt is made to find evidence for progress by expanding the context within which it is measured. The time span is extended to include the whole of human history and biological development; the area of analysis takes in all mankind; the criterion is equated with survival value. In this setting progress appears either as a law of development or as a principle of creativity, according as the mechanistic or the vitalistic world view is the underlying metaphysic. Thus arise the theories of universal progress in which time merges with eternity; the cosmos is the scene of action; and

progress is equated with cosmic purpose.

The case for progress in history and biological development is argued as follows: First, it is asserted that social evolution has resulted in progress, for just as biological development issued in an end of value, i.e., man, so modern civilization with all its faults is judged superior to primitive. Not that modern civilization is to be considered the end result of social progress as man is regarded the end result of biological evolution, but that its character is sufficiently advanced over primitive life to indicate that society is moving in the direction of a goal, namely, the creation of a world community. Secondly, the theory of the essentially progressive character of the whole process is advanced, apparently on the same grounds as in the case of biological evolution, i.e., the assumption that historical development either follows necessary rules, or is creative in character. Thus we have individuals influenced by deterministic theories of evolution urging the discovery of the laws of history, while on the other hand those influenced by the vitalistic emphasis urge abandonment to the forces of change, confident that every new development is the work of the mysterious creative power inherent in the historic process and hence "for the best."

The bulk of the criticism of these theories of universal progress is directed not against the initial premise that progress has been made in the course of biological and social evolution, or against the assumptions of the worth of man and the reality of time and change on which this premise is based, important as these assumptions are, but against the conclusion that progress is universal and inevitable because implicit in the evolutionary process itself. The criticism takes various forms according as the mechanistic or the vitalistic version is under scrutiny, but three main types may be noted, namely, that generalizations concerning the nature of the evolutionary process as a whole cannot be made unless certain aspects are emphasized to the exclusion of others; secondly, that belief in its progressive character is derived not from a study of the process itself, but from certain a priori assumptions with respect to its origin, nature, and destiny which should be acknowledged; thirdly, that the doctrine is ethically demoralizing because lacking in the clear-cut criteria of progress essential to ethical action, and



because frequently productive of a laissez faire attitude with respect to evil.

Let us consider these objections in more detail. The mechanistic theories of progress break down because the idea of spontaneity as an "ultimate and universal category of all things" runs counter to attempts to interpret the evolutionary process in terms of uniform laws. This is particularly evident to historians who have discovered that "the uniqueness and unrepeatability of historical events are quite as significant as the general sociological laws which may be represented in them."<sup>1</sup> Thus laws of the evolutionary process are in no sense absolute or determinative, but are simply abstractions with respect to those phases of the process which lend themselves to generalization. It is plain, therefore, that since we cannot speak of the evolutionary process in terms of uniform causal sequences, we cannot speak of a universal law of progress. On the other hand, the vitalists' theory of universal progress breaks down because of an overemphasis of the category of spontaneity. There is certainly an element of contingency in the evolutionary process, but to regard it as evidence of the "inherent radicalism of nature herself"<sup>2</sup> is to give it a universal significance which is problematical. Any theory of progress based upon such generalizations must be abandoned.

However, although belief in evolutionary progress was expressed in terms of these monistic philosophies of evolution and is consequently affected by their modification, it has been justly observed that in the last analysis these philosophies appeared to support the doctrine of progress only because approached from the standpoint of a convinced optimism. The deterministic system seemed to offer a guarantee of progress because regarded a priori as good in itself or as the work of a beneficent Creator who sustains it, while the vitalistic was dependent upon belief in an innate purpose guiding the process in the direction of a desirable end. That is, spontaneity must mean creativity, and creativity must be indicative of purpose before the vitalistic theory of the

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<sup>1</sup>H. Richard Niebuhr in Paul Tillich, The Religious Situation (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1932), Preface, p. xv.

<sup>2</sup>J. H. Robinson, The New History (New York: Macmillan, 1922), p. 264.

world appeared relevant to the doctrine of progress. Thus for mechanism the problem of origin is central, for vitalism that of destiny, and Dawson is quite right in his observation that the mechanistic theory of progress was only possible in the context of Deism, while the vitalistic derived its authority from the prevalent version of the Christian teleological conception of life.<sup>1</sup> And the importance of these prior assumptions becomes even more marked when we consider that in a different metaphysical context both mechanism and vitalism lend themselves to a cyclical theory of history, or to a theory of historical degeneration. In the case of the former, mechanism supports the notion of an endless repetition of meaningless events, vitalism of ceaseless flux; with respect to the latter, mechanism suggests the figure of the clock running down, vitalism of a dying organism.

Finally, that the doctrines of evolutionary progress may be ethically demoralizing is fairly evident. As stated, neither the mechanistic nor the vitalistic versions offer an adequate criterion of progress. "The one criterion for real Darwinism is the abstract success or prevalence of whatever happens to prevail, without any regard for its character. This leaves us with no criterion at all."<sup>2</sup> Nor is change in itself necessarily a good, though many exponents of the vitalistic theory come perilously near equating it with progress. Change may be destructive as well as creative; too great or too sudden changes in the circumstances of life may destroy an organism or a society; some standard of value other than mere becoming is necessary if the doctrine of progress is to have any ethical significance. Progress is a moral concept; it implies a judgment of better or worse, and the majority of scientists are at pains to point out that their researches do not give us this sort of information. This absence of moral standards was apt to go unnoticed, in part because individuals unconsciously read their own criteria of value into the evolutionary process, in part because of the tendency of the doctrines of progress to foster a specious optimism with respect to evil. The temptation is either to ignore the disagreeable aspects

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<sup>1</sup>Christopher Dawson, Progress and Religion (London: Sheed & Ward, 1931), pp. 190 f.; 220 f.

<sup>2</sup>W. R. Inge, God and the Astronomers (New York: Longmans Green & Co., 1933), pp. 132, 133.



of life as relatively insignificant in the long run, or to accept them unquestioningly as the price of progress. Such progress, if progress it be, is blind, unethical progress. It is preferable to promote progress by intelligent activity which seeks to banish evil rather than to wait for good to come from evil by a process of unconscious growth.

In the light of this criticism of the doctrine of progress four main possibilities are open to contemporary philosophy of history: To abandon the idea entirely and turn to a theory of historical degeneration or of cyclical change as more in accord with the facts of nature and history; to shift the emphasis from the inevitability to the possibility of progress and work for its achievement in certain definite areas without further speculation as to the nature of the processes which may support it; to attempt a new interpretation of history which shall take account of its pluralistic character and yet serve to integrate men in their efforts to achieve progress by providing them with an acceptable metaphysic; to relate the hope of progress to some "unconditioned aspect of existence made known by mysticism or revelation.

The second and third alternatives appeal to us as giving the most promise of a fruitful solution. The pragmatists offer a strong program for action in their assertion that history is to be understood as a complex of processes working toward ever new forms of existence, and that men have the ability to influence the direction of change through the struggle to achieve goals consciously chosen with reference to each specific situation and inclusive of the maximum values inherent in that situation. On the other hand, the organismic philosophies of history give us hope that there are processes in nature and in history which may serve to promote and sustain the goals desired,--that offer support in the "great task of unifying history." As Lyman observes:

Just as an age-long process of biological development made possible human personality--a process which, if human personality has intrinsic worth, must be called progress--so there has been within the general stream of human evolution a development of morals which has meant a growth of individual personality and a growth of society in such a way that in varying degrees they have mutually furthered each other. So far as this is true or in process of becoming true, we are bound to acknowledge the reality of progress in human history.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>E. W. Lyman, The Meaning and Truth of Religion (New York and London: Scribners, 1933), p. 334.

The problem, however, is to link these various lines of progress,-- organic, racial, social--in a general scheme of development which shall make clear the relationship between the necessary and the contingent elements in experience. To this end is posited the doctrine of emergent evolution which, by the device of allocating the various progressive movements to different levels of development, allows for both cumulative structural unities and indeterminate action. In a sense this is a reinterpretation of the doctrine of progress but it lacks the absoluteness, universality, and certainty of the versions relied upon by the social gospel theologians studied, and thus squares better with the tragic aspects of human experience and the necessity of ceaseless moral effort.

In conclusion, we append a brief recapitulation of our thesis and our position with respect to the issues raised by it. The study of the theoretical basis of the social gospel as formulated by Gladden, Rauschenbusch, Mathews, and Ward revealed (1) a dependence upon a doctrine of universal progress which can no longer be defended as a basis of social idealism; (2) a confidence in the authority of the historian which failed to take adequate account of the tentative and relativistic character of all historical judgments and the necessity of discriminating between the respective roles of history and philosophy in the creation of a social ethic. Therefore our interest in preserving the values of the social gospel led us to attempt an analysis (1) of the valid use of history in the reformulation of the social gospel, (2) of the issues involved in the development of a new philosophy of history as a basis for social idealism. Our conclusions may be summarized as follows:

The first task of the social gospel theologian is to achieve an adequate understanding of the origin and nature of the social problems of the present day, and of the values at stake. This means that he must make use of history to enrich his understanding of human behavior, to insure his avoidance of certain types of error, and to become acquainted with the range and variety of values to be cherished and their relevance to various types of social living. History provides the factual content of ethical judgments, but philosophy must provide the critique of these ethical judgments by clarification and analysis of the underlying issues when a choice of values is involved.

Secondly, the social gospel theologian must continue to

affirm his belief in the possibility of achieving an increasingly harmonious and unified world order in which the individual may live an increasingly rich, varied, and creative life, in spite of the fact that the former foundations of this ideal, namely, the authority of Jesus and the doctrine of universal progress have been undermined. The attempt to recapture the historical Jesus slavishly to imitate his way of life is futile. It is of primary importance to understand, as far as may be, the life of Jesus and the ideals for which he stood, for judgments of value should be based on the richest possible content, and Jesus' significance as a creative religious genius is very great. But this procedure does not mean uncritical and inevitable acceptance of his way of life as the final norm. Instead choices must be made on the basis of the most inclusive social ethic conceivable at the moment, with due recognition of its tentative character and of the compromises necessitated in relating the far goal to the specific situation. The ideals of the social gospel are self validating in the sense that they represent the most inclusive social ethic yet envisaged and thus meet the demands of the philosopher for rationality and inclusiveness. The social gospel theologian may take his stand upon them without apology.

In the third place, there is hope that a new philosophy of history is in the making which will satisfy the various criticisms of the doctrine of progress presented above, and serve as a new foundation for the social ideals advocated,--i.e., the interpretation of history advocated by the various philosophies of organism. Their assertions that world history is to be understood in terms of the emergence of the new from the complex interaction of the various physical, biological, and social processes, and that some of these processes sustain and further the harmonious social organization of life desired gives new confidence in the validity of the goals envisaged.

In fine, the resources of the social gospel theologian can be summarized as follows: (1) The historian offers the raw material of ethical judgments. (2) The pragmatist offers inclusiveness as a defensible criterion of ethical judgments, and gives it concrete content in terms of the loyalties involved in each specific decision. (3) The exponents of the various organic philosophies provide a metaphysical undergirding for broad ethical ideals. (4) The advocates of the dialectical point of



view, together with the pragmatist, forbid indulgence in the vain dream of an easily attained Utopia by their emphasis upon the inescapable tensions of existence. Out of these materials can the new social gospel be formulated.





